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Students' Perception of Speaking Practice In Step Up English Club at Ho Chi Minh City University Of Technology and Education

Nguyễn Thị Nhã Quỳnh*

Faculty of Foreign Languages, Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology and Education, Vietnam

*Correspondence: E-mail: 18950014@student.hcmute.edu.vn

ABSTRACT

English club was a club of students with common ambitions or interests in English. This study aims to find out Students' Perceptions of Speaking Practice in the Step-Up English Club (SU) club. This study used the qualitative method, observation, and interview as research instruments. The subject of this study is the members of the SU club as participants. As the result of interviews, most of the students had positive perceptions about joining in SU club, yet some still haven't adapted to the online meetings. The students believe that SU clubs could improve their fluency. The student also had a perception through an English meeting club as a proper environment to enhance skills especially in speaking. There are similarities between this research and the previous research. English meeting clubs have a positive influence on learning English. However, there are some different results found, especially from the social distancing time during Covid 19 pandemic. Positively, with both online meetings and offline meetings, the SU Club gives students a place to properly practice speaking English without fear to make mistakes and is an appropriate medium to improve students' speaking skills. However, English clubs, in general, should design more diverse and fun activities, to gradually change students' reluctance to take online sessions.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Mastering speaking is a quite difficult matter as the students need to practice frequently. The strategy of practicing speaking is quite different from other skills. When practicing, the learners also need other interlocutors to make speaking work and build up reflexes. Several types of research related to students' perception toward English Club have been conducted previously by other previous researchers. The Contribution of Pioneer English Meeting Conversation Club Toward the Participant's Speaking Skill. She concluded that the factors that contributed to the improvement of participants' speaking skills were participants' motivation, learning model, and comfortable classroom atmosphere.

Students' Perception Toward English Club Extracurricular Activities in Practicing Speaking at SMA N 02 Kaur, Bengkulu. Yeyen underlined that the English club has a great power to encourage students' motivation to practice speaking with their friends. In the English club, students felt more comfortable speaking with their friends since they can share comfortably their ideas. The participants can exchange information and upgrade their vocabulary. It had been known that in getting better speaking ability, vocabulary knowledge plays an important role.

Clubs also help students increase the student's ability to socialize with their friends and teacher who can help the members in participating in the learning process well. English club encourages students' willingness to practicing speaking, and most of the English club students perceived that they prefer practicing speaking in English club than regular class.

Based on some studies above, it could be assumed that there are similarities between this research and the previous researches, it can be seen from the English Club affecting speaking ability that investigated. English meeting club has a positive influence on learning English. However, there are some different results found, especially from the social distancing time during Covid 19 pandemic. Based on it, the research was conducted on students' perception in practicing speaking English at Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology and Education (HCMUTE). HCMUTE facilitated many English clubs, but unfortunately, the number of participants was not as expected. This study was conducted to find out the students' perceptions on speaking practice as well as factors affecting them in the English club. This study took 10 students who are SU club members in HCMUTE as the sample. A qualitative method was applied. Observation and interview were the instruments that were used in this research.

- (i) First, during the time of social distancing, students cannot go to English centers to learn English speaking as well as cannot go out to areas where a lot of foreigners come such as parks or neighborhoods of foreigners to practice English speaking. It may be also shy to make friends on social networks with people who have the same goal of practicing speaking English. Students may not have enough motivation and willpower to practice at home alone.
- (ii) Second, students need a fun way to learn English which is considered difficult because English is a foreign language for students in Vietnam. Thus, in learning English, students need fun learning methods, which will make students like English and will make them easier to master speaking.

- (iii) Third, there are some problems faced by students in learning English especially in speaking. Students were reluctant to speak because they were afraid of being wrong in reciting English. They also were less daring to express their opinions. The lack of imagination and critical thinking is also the problem faced by the students.
- (iv) The last problem is a lack of student awareness of the importance of practicing English because, in Vietnam, most English students do not use English when they are outside the classroom. Furthermore, some students do not know the benefits of an English club. For some students who consider English as a difficult subject, they do not want to join the English club because they assume that if they follow the English club, it will make them more confused.

According to the background of the study, the scope and limitation of the research object need to be made to make the topic focused. The research focused on the perception of students at HCMUTE who practice speaking at SU club extracurricular activities.

This study took the main problem of this research: How is students' perception toward practicing speaking in SU club at HCMUTE?

The result of this research is expected to give some advantages as follows:

- (i) For students, hopefully, they can understand the benefits of the SU club as well as online meetings of all English clubs, and they will have the motivation to participate in English clubs and practice speaking English.
- (ii) For the reader, this research can become a helpful source of information and reference.
- (iii) For the teacher, the result can be used as references, so that the teacher can improve their students' motivation in communicating using English and participating in English clubs.
- (iv) For the school and English clubs, it is expected that the result of the research can increase the quality of English clubs and hold better meetings for practicing.

2. THEORY

2.1. Perception

"Perception is an idea, a belief or an image you have as a result of how you see or understand something" (Oxford University Press, n.d.). Perception is not only the passive receipt of signals, but it's also shaped by the recipient's learning, memory, expectation, and attention. Based on this definition, it can be understood that students' perception toward practicing speaking in English clubs is the way students expect, think about, believe in practicing speaking in English clubs.

2.2. Speaking skill

When we learn a language, there are four skills that we need for complete communication, namely listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing, receiving, and processing words or information between an individual and more in a certain context (Mulya, 2016). In this research, students' speaking skills were focused on more. Because speaking is the main point that clubs aim to, and states that the first visible of one's language quality can be seen from his speaking ability, and a key to reach good communication is to be capable of speaking plainly and articulately for one's success in life.

2.3. English club

An English club is a place for a group of people who meet regularly to work on their English skills together in a casual setting. "The benefit of English clubs is providing a pleasant and informal setting which includes the objective in its learning and to practice a variety of styles of English, making friendships and learning about cultural diversity" (Hanim, 2018). English clubs help improve participants' vocabulary and phrasal words, correct common speaking and pronunciation mistakes, practice listening skills and speaking in a setting that is akin to everyday life, and encourage confidence with speaking English. Students may feel more comfortable practicing English around people they trust and have fun with. In the same way, extracurricular meetings of the SU club are non-formal learning activities carried out by students, generally outside the standard curriculum study hours. English clubs are not compulsory, so students have the right to join or not. There are two types of meeting in English clubs: offline meetings and online meetings.

2.4. Concepts of Online Meeting of English Club

In this age of technological advancement, English clubs can now provide effective online meetings to keep activities going via the Web and virtual meeting platforms such as Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Classic, or other online platforms. From such virtual English club sessions, there are several advantages and disadvantages which can differ from person to person. The followings are just a few general ones commonly heard.

Responses to a survey about online and traditional course formats found that students' reasons for taking online courses were the flexibility to accommodate their schedules and the ability to avoid commuting to the university. Correspondingly, the advent of the online meeting has made it possible for students with busy lives and limited flexibility to attend, especially in the social distancing time. It can be accessed from anywhere with a device and internet connection. Therefore, it is convenient and budget-friendly. Students also prefer recorded content with conversations of each meeting to improve the effectiveness of later practice. With some preparation and a game plan, clubs can have online meetings that are just as productive and collaborative as getting everyone in the same room.

Although there are advantages, online meetings still have their disadvantages, including limited communal synergies. Poor Internet connectivity problems also arise many times during online sessions. It may destroy the motivation and mood of participants and leaders of meetings. The effect on the improvement of speaking skills maybe not be as efficient as it would be if done offline. So far, the online meeting has become the "New Normal" since the beginning of the global COVID pandemic.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

How the data were collected is explained in this part. This research used the qualitative method. The techniques of data collection included observation and interview as instruments.

3.2. Site and Selection of the Sample

The subjects for this study were the members of the SU club in HCMUTE which is located at 01 Vo Van Ngan Street, Thu Duc city, Vietnam. The selection of this place was based on some reasons. Firstly, HCMUTE is one of the popular universities in Vietnam that can be seen from the number of students. Furthermore, it has many English clubs which attract many students to join. These participants come from a variety of backgrounds and majors which start from first-year students up to final-year students. The final reason is that this study attended HCMUTE and also joining as a leader in the SU club which is under the management of the Faculty of Foreign Languages - HCMUTE. Purposive sampling for this study was used. The participant of this research must be the person who used to experience practicing speaking in English clubs so that this study on perception toward practicing speaking in English clubs at HCMUTE would not just be theoretical or ambiguous but real and practical. From the observations done each week, the maximum number of members of each club in HCMUTE is 20-25 participants, the most active ones are members of the SU club. Therefore, 10 people among members of SU were chosen as research participants of this research. This study took 5 students who join meetings of English clubs frequently (at least 1 time a week) and 5 students who join meetings just occasionally (at most 1 time every two weeks) to bring universality to the conclusion of students' perception toward practicing speaking in the English club.

4. THE TECHNIQUE OF DATA COLLECTION

The study adopted qualitative data collection methods. This method helps adding more depth, and context to the data as well as gain an understanding of students' reasons, opinions, motivations, and thoughts so that their perception can be drawn out. The techniques of data collection used are observation and interview.

4.1. Observation

The observation was used to get information directly about the behavior, situation, or attribute of the students in a naturalistic setting (**Table 1**). In addition, this technique helps to anticipate the insufficiency of prepared questions for interviews. Weekly meetings of the SU club were chosen for observation to take data. Here, this study acted like a complete participant and focused on the natural activity of the clubs without informing the club that it was the understudy.

The first observation was held on 20 March 2021 in the SU club. This study collected valid data about the environment of the campus, the process of meetings to investigate whether the speaking club improves the students' speaking ability and to find out the students' responses toward the performance of the speaking clubs. In a little more detail, by observing them meetings on the following days (**Table 1**. The Observation schedule), this study expected to know:

- (i) How the meeting starts: whether the introduction is fun, motivated, related to one topic, and the MC clearly explains something to students or not, etc.
- (ii) How the topic is.
- (iii) How students are divided for practicing: in small groups, in pairs, etc.
- (iv) How the timeline is: time for discussion, game, speech, etc.
- (v) How the club engages the students to talk.
- (vi) How do students feel after each part of the meeting/why?

Table 1. The Observation schedules.

Day	Venue
April 17 th , 2021	A5-202
April 24 th , 2021	A5-202
August 28 th , 2021	Google Meet platform (meet.google.com/vig-jhix-wwc)
September 11 th , 2021	Google Meet platform (https://meet.google.com/wvq-qxwu-gcy)

4.2. Interviews

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with participants to get some information needed for this research. The data was expecting to gather is information about the contribution of the English club on students' speaking ability as well as the students' purpose to join the English conversation club. Students will be asked one by one in the language that they want. This kind of interview is also known as an in-depth interview which is particularly useful for getting the story and the reason behind the participant's experiences. Their information is needed to make the data more detailed and stronger than what this study already had in the observation. This study used Camtasia as an instrument to record the interviews. Note-taking was also used as another instrument to get additional information during the interview. For online interviews, this study used the Google Meet platform to conduct online face-to-face interviews.

This study used a semi-structured interview which helps collect open-ended data, to explore and collect participant thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about practicing speaking in SU club, and to delve acutely into personal and sometimes sensitive issues. This study prepared some questions below for the interview:

- (i) What is your opinion of English clubs?
- (ii) What makes meetings of English clubs worthwhile for you?
- (iii) What is frustrating you with your speaking?
- (iv) What factors are limiting your speaking from being better?
- (v) What do you think you can do in the SU club? How could SU help you with your problems?
- (vi) What has been done to improve your speaking skills so far? (Why don't you choose English clubs as a way to help you improve your speaking skills?)
- (vii) What are the positive and negative aspects of joining the SU club's online meeting based on your opinion?
- (viii) What are the positive and negative aspects of joining the SU club's offline meeting based on your opinion?
- (ix) In your opinion, is there any effect after you participate in SU club programs in improving your speaking skill? Give your reason.

4.3. Ethical Issues

This study informed the students about the purpose of the research, the potential benefits of the research, the anticipated duration of the study, and the procedures that were used. Participants were told that they had the right to decline to participate in the study. They also could withdraw from the experiment at any time because of no consequences of declining or withdrawing from the study. Limitations on confidentiality would be also disclosed.

5. RESULTS

5.1. Data Analysis Strategies

The research design strategy for this research was a case study and a descriptive case study was chosen as a research design. The first reason for the choice is that this study does not have enough resources to do large-scale research. Secondly, with this strategy, this study can gain concrete, contextual, in-depth knowledge about students' perception toward practicing speaking in SU club at HCMUTE and then more easily describe, compare, evaluate, and understanding different aspects of it. Therefore, the research findings will be transcribed and interpreted into descriptive forms.

This study used simple notetaking and also do rudimentary analysis while observing - behavioral coding. In the interview, this study could analyze interviews collected earlier, write the memo that was ultimately included as a narrative in the final report, and organize the structure of the final report. This study selected, focused, simplified, abstracted, and transformed the data that appear in written-up field notes. The analysis covered reviewing, coding, categorizing, synthesizing, and interpreting the gathered information from the observation and interview. This study also compared the result of recording and the result of interviews and made inferences based on the perspective of participants.

A list of the result was made into two groups: students who join meetings of SU club just occasionally and students who join meetings frequently, then made comparisons between them about perception. Finally, all the data analyses were formulated into conclusions and suggestions.

5.2. Result

5.2.1. Participants' Information

There were 4 students from the Faculty of Foreign Languages, HCMUTE. They are members of the SU club and joined every meeting it. In which, 2 students were in the second year, 1 of them was in the third year, 1 student was in the fourth year.

6 students who join meetings just occasionally (at most 1 time every two weeks) were interviewed. In which, there are 2 fourth-year students, 2 third years, and 2 graduate students.

5.2.2. Research Findings

5.2.2.1. The Implementation of SU Club

The implementation of the SU club is very simple, accurate, and qualified. This is due to the full support of the Faculty of Foreign Languages (FFL). How they process and carry out appropriate learning procedures but also does not deviate from the curriculum.

SU club was formed on November 16th, 2008, under the management of the Faculty of Foreign Languages (FFL). The mentor of the club (2019 - 2021) is Mr. Nguyen Trung Hieu, lecturer of FFL. The time given for the implementation of this program is one and a half hours. This program is for all people including those majoring in English-related areas and other majors, students in other schools, and even former students.

For the implementation of the meeting in the week, the SU club posts information about the weekly topic including lists of vocabulary related to that topic on their Facebook page. In the meeting, the first begins with an introduction between the hosts of the meeting and the participants. Next, the hosts introduce the topic and show 3 to 4 questions on TV with PowerPoint slides for participants to discuss. In this discussion part, participants are divided into small groups of 4 to 8 students depending on the number of participants. For each

question, they have 5 minutes to discuss. After that, the hosts invited someone to present their answers on stage. The host watched for about 30 minutes for the discussion, then moved to the next part "Debate". Participants were divided into two teams to discuss one debate question. The host asks each team to defend one viewpoint which is opposing to the other team. After 15 minutes of brainstorming, each side is given time to speak. Next, every member of each side could disagree with the ideas of previous speakers and ask questions and the other team must explain. This debate part lasts about 30 minutes.

In addition, entertainment such as singing, dancing, playing games, quizzes are interwoven into the beginning, middle, or end of the meeting. However, all these activities are also fun activities to learn English. The participants look very enthusiastic. The language used in each meeting is English.

5.2.2.2. Students' Opinion on The English Clubs

Students' opinion about English clubs is very positive. From the result of interviews, it showed that the students were interested in English clubs very much not only for speaking practice but also for many other factors. Particularly, the student's opinions on the English clubs are:

5.2.2.2.1. English clubs increase their knowledge

Based on the interview, one of the member's motivations to join English clubs that interviewees mentioned first is to increase their knowledge and experience.

Based on the interview to the students on Sunday, 03rd October 2021 "Mỗi buổi meeting đều có một chủ đề khác nhau, nên em có được nhiều kiến thức khác nhau từ buổi meeting đó truyền đạt."

5.2.2.2.2. To Mastering Speaking and Vocabulary

The second opinion of the students about the English Club is to adapt to speaking English especially International English Language Testing System (IELTS) speaking test and improve their level. The student is aware that English is important these days, and they need to practice speaking frequently with others. There are also many students admitting that the English club does not help them to be good at English directly but gives them more motivation to improve their speaking skills.

Based on the interview to a leader of content team in SU club: "Khi mới vào trường đại học, em muốn tìm một nơi mà em thuộc về và gặp những người bạn cùng chí hướng để luyện tập thêm tiếng Anh và nâng cao trình độ của mình. Và em đã tìm đến những câu lạc bộ Tiếng Anh. Tuy nhiên đến thời điểm hiện tại, về vấn đề phát triển tiếng Anh thì câu lạc bộ không đóng góp cho em nhiều, bởi vì một tuần chỉ sinh hoạt một lần. Nhưng điều em nhận được là động lực cải thiện tiếng Anh sau mỗi buổi sinh hoạt" (The interview with Lai Minh Ly on Sunday, 03rd October 2021). "English clubs help students a lot and makes a playground for me to practice and a good environment for me to use my English." (The interview with Doan Thai Binh on Sunday, 03rd October 2021).

Students also gave positive comments on lists of vocabulary that SU club posts on their Facebook page regularly. Besides, members of the content team of the SU club said that when they find and design lists of vocabulary for each weekly meeting, they could improve their vocabulary a lot.

5.2.2.2.3. To Have Fun, Make New Friends and Learn Other Skills

They said that they can cultivate many things from English clubs especially the SU club which helps them not only English but also gets used to university culture soon, expand their relationships with even foreigners. They have a chance to improve communication skills, leadership, and the ability to stand in front of a crowd. Moreover, the activities of clubs make them feel comfortable and have fun. “Đây là nơi cân bằng giữa việc chơi và việc học.” (The interview with Nguyen Thai Minh on Saturday, 02nd October 2021).

5.2.2.3. The Contribution of SU Club to Development Speaking

The contribution of the SU club was positive. The students said that several problems were frustrating them with their speaking such as accent, pronunciation, small vocabulary size, or lack of ideas. There also stands some factors limiting their speaking from being better like laziness, lack of English environment and motivation. Nevertheless, the SU club brings them a very interesting environment and motivation to improve their speaking. “Đây là nơi cân bằng giữa việc chơi và việc học.” (The interview with Nguyen Thai Minh on Saturday, 02nd October 2021)

After joining in SU club, students speaking abilities were higher than before joining, based on interviews with members of the content team of the SU club. This could afford the opportunity for language practice and especially for IELTS (International English Language Testing System). For example, the first fifteen minutes in each meeting are like IELTS Speaking Part 1, and the next part – Discussion is like IELTS Speaking Part 2, and the final part – Debate is like IELTS Writing Part 2. These types of activities help students familiarize themselves with the format of IELTS which can help students no longer need to take an English exam to graduate, be prepared with ideas of various topics each week to afford them experience taking real one.

Each class seems like a lesson with the method “learner-centeredness”. “By group work, students can provide help to others while performing the activity” (The interview with Nguyen Dinh Khang on Sunday, 03rd October 2021). Students have less fear of making mistakes when speaking English when working in groups. Although online meetings do not bring that benefit from group work, students still felt that pros in another way. “You can be yourself. In a face-to-face meeting, you can be very shy, but at home, you will not be afraid and can speak whatever you want. The others will not know your face and who you are, so will not judge you.” (The interview with Doan Thai Binh on Saturday, 02nd October 2021).

Thus, the result of the implementation of the SUC in HCMUTE could enhance students’ knowledge, particularly in mastering speaking ability. Then, in the English club that is conducted once a week. Those topics were used to discuss by students outside class in the school. Moreover, the SU club has an important role in enriching the student's motivation in improving their speaking skill, where students spoke English to interact with their friends around HCMUTE every day. In general, there are some influenced of the SU club on enhancing student's speaking ability after joining in SU club as follows:

- (i) The SU club motivated students to self-improve their speaking.
- (ii) The SU club made students confident to speak in front of each other.
- (iii) The SU club made students improve their English-speaking reflex and speak fluently.
- (iv) The SU club gave students the environment to use English and chances to find, learn and master a lot of vocabulary and grammar.
- (v) The SU club helps students relieve the pressure of speaking practice with activities.
- (vi) Thanks to the teachers and seniors in the club, students have more determination and perseverance to practice speaking.

5.3. Discussion

5.3.1. The Implementation of SU Club

SU club is a media bridging one person with the others in which the purpose not only is to improve their speaking ability but also to improve students' motivation and build up their confidence to speak as much as possible.

The implementation of the SU club is very simple, qualified, and useful. Weekly topics are diverse and catch up with the trend of the young. By having the SU club, the students could share their knowledge with their friends. It also might be a better place to share students' difficulties in practicing speaking and to look forward to how to solve their problems. Especially with academic questions similar to those in IELTS, the SU club allow participants to practice speaking IELTS test.

English club is what they do all have in common, however, is that they provide an opportunity for English language learners to practice using English and other skills. The teachers can make an excellent contribution to students. English clubs give students a chance to practice English in a relaxed, informal environment, to meet new people.

5.3.2. Students' Opinion on The English Clubs

According to the instrument applied in this study, students of HCMUTE are excited to follow the English Club. Their motivations in participating English conversation club were such as to get more experience, knowledge a good environment to practice English. English conversation club gave them a lot of knowledge especially in speaking. They were always motivated to be confident in whatever they say in front of many participants, the most important thing is they want to speak up. As time goes on, they will be better; however, the majority of students said that they were not very excited about online meetings. Although in online meetings, the SU club still organizes the same activities, they do not feel the improvement in presentation skills much.

Besides, there were other motivations. they wanted to find more friends. In English Club, they were family. Although they are from different classes and levels, they knew each other, motivated each other, and learned together. With online meetings, they hardly make friends, so perhaps that is the other reason why they did not feel excited to join.

English Club aims to helps its members to improve their conversational and interpersonal skills in a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere. It can be understood that the atmosphere is influenced by all of the students that joining English Club.

5.3.3. The Contribution of SU Club to Development Speaking of The Students

When this study tried to dig information about the contribution of SU Club to the development speaking of the students, they said that discussion has a contribution to their speaking skill but not much. Because there is just one meeting per week, they just join to be motivated to practice English. The topic of some meetings is difficult for the new participants to deliver, but they felt interesting to learn new knowledge from seniors. The activities in the SU Club were mostly concerned with students' speaking ability, while activities in their regular class focus more on the four skills of English competence. The main purpose of holding SU Club is to improve students' motivation to speak English especially practice IELTS speaking tests with high confidence even though the students only can produce one word. It is believed that SU Club makes the students have many experiences and an ideal environment to practice and show their English. Through SU Club, all students can express their opinion without

feeling afraid, whereas in a regular class or at home, the students cannot practice speaking well and they are not motivated to speak English.

6. CONCLUSION

The findings of the research study revealed important points related to the implementation of the SU club. Based on data gathered and analyzed from observation and interview, it can be concluded that most of the students gave positive responses toward SU club activities. Most of the students perceived that they prefer practicing in SU Club. It is because the students can practice English without feeling afraid of scores, be motivated, exchange their opinion, and have more friends. So English Club gives the students a place to fully practicing English. In addition, the SU club also successfully encourages students' motivation to practice speaking with friends. The students could come together to share their knowledge and experience in English without being afraid of making mistakes. English Club plays an important role in supporting students to practice speaking. They were being more interested in practicing English in the English Club. The students also perceived that most of the students feel glad. Toward English Club activities. In other words, they will get more experience and get more knowledge while following English Club. In addition, all of the students said that the class atmosphere tends to be fun and comfortable through English Club. It makes the students more spirit and interest to join in English Club. English Club is one of many ways to improve students in speaking fluently. Breaking the students into small groups and interacting in the language classroom can decrease students' anxiety in learning English speaking skills. Students should change their role from passive to active learners, especially in online meetings.

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8. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. Authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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